The Deception of the Church

by Leo Tolstoy

I have received and continue to receive your numerous letters, and I should like to answer in detail what to me is the most important part in them.

I think it superfluous to reply to your unjust assumptions that (1) I am angry with you, (2) that I think that our life ends here, and (3) that I must be worried by the financial help to some (selected by you out of millions of just such people, who surround me), because all these replies have been made by me in advance in my writings with as great a circumstantiality as I am capable of. (I sent you a collection of my writings.) In my prohibited writings, you know, you will find these answers.

I cannot be angry with you because, above all, I love you, and so I should like to help you in your hard and dangerous situation myself. I am speaking of your desire to hypnotize yourself into the ecclesiastic faith. This is very dangerous, because that which is most precious in man – his reason – is lost with such hypnotization.

I shall begin from the beginning. I began this letter before receiving the letter about Isaák Sírin with the copy of the declaration to the governor. This letter of yours and the declaration still more provoked in me the desire, and called out in me the consciousness of my duty, to try to help you. I will say frankly that, not you alone, but many people are in the same situation with you, or are about to enter into it. I am speaking of sincere, pure men, who adopt this or that conviction, not in order to justify their situation, but only because they see the truth in it.

One day, a very rich and distinguished lady of the court, speaking of faith, told me that she believed “like Mother Akulína,” and she apparently thought that she had said something very clever and even profound. She is such a refined lady, and yet she condescends to believe like Mother Akulína. But she not only said something stupid; she even told an absolute untruth.

This lady is educated in all kinds of languages, has studied cosmography and history, and knows of the existence of Voltaire, Renan, Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. She cannot believe like Mother Akulína. Mother Akulína, in her belief in the Mother (the Queen of Heaven), the Father (the King of Heaven), Saint Nicholas, and so forth, believes in the highest truth that has been reached by her consciousness. This belief not only does not present any contradiction with her comprehension of life, but it even illuminates and elucidates the phenomena of the world for her. This is impossible for the lady. She knows that the world was not created six thousand years ago; she knows that mankind has not been derived from Adam and Eve, but from the evolution of the animal; she knows that, besides the Christians of her denomination, there are five times as many people of faiths other than the Christian faith; she knows that Christianity has been corrupted and has brought forth hundreds and thousands of inimical sects, and has degenerated into the Inquisition and into savage fanaticism; she knows how the ecumenical councils, in which the dogmas were established, took place; she knows that the same happened in Buddhism with their King Asoka, and in other faiths; she knows that the religions are subject to the same law of evolution as organisms and states – they are born, develop, reach the highest point, and then grow old and disappear like the Egyptian and the Persian religions; she knows that our so-called Holy Scripture did not come down from heaven, but was written by men, was purged and corrupted, and so cannot have any infallible authority; she knows that there is no firm heaven and that, therefore, neither Enoch, nor Elijah, nor Christ
had any place to go to when they flew away from the earth, and that, if they flew upwards, they
are flying still; she knows that all those miracles with which they try to prove the authenticity of
the ecclesiastic faith – the birth from a virgin, the signs at birth, the prophecies, the wisdom in
childhood, the cures, the miracles, the resurrection, and everything else – are repeated in all the
other faiths, just as are the miracles of the exploits of the heroes in the popular epics. The lady
must know all that because she has been taught all that, she could have read all that in the books
accessible to her, and all that is known to those gentlemen who frequent her drawing-room.

And so, she not only has no right to believe like Mother Akulína, but she even cannot believe
like her. She can say that she believes so, but she cannot believe so. For her to believe, she
needs a faith in which she could, like that woman, believe in the highest truth reached by her
cognition, a faith that would not contradict her comprehension of the phenomena of the world, a
faith that would illumine, elucidate, and unify all her knowledge.

This lady will not understand me, because she needs the faith of Mother Akulína in order that
she may be able to continue to live as she does, impiously swallowing the labor of hundreds of
working people every day for the gratification of her lusts and luxury, while speaking of God,
Christ, and her religiousness at the same time. Only by adopting and professing the faith of
Mother Akulína – the faith of men who lived two thousand years ago – can she lead such an
impious life with the self-contentment of religiousness. I can understand this behavior in the
case of the lady. But what do you, who are deported to the end of the world, who are going from
one prison to another and from place to place because you want to introduce the Christian truths
into life – what do you want with this terrible deception and insolvable contradiction between
your beliefs, your knowledge, and your comprehension of the phenomena of the universe?

Just think what you profess and what situation you are in. I understand that it is very nice
and agreeable to feel one in faith with those who surround us, when the bells toll the “hours”
during Lent, when the communicants go and ask each other’s forgiveness, and when praying in
beautiful churches, calling forth images of the ancient, peaceful, solemn life. It would be very
good to be united with them and to live that life. But that is a self-deception; it is only the playing
of a part. Your situation is not the same. Now, during Lent, you are in Pudózh, living in God’s
universe upon the planet Earth, which is inhabited by fifteen hundred million inhabitants of all
kinds of races, who profess different religions, in this one hundred thousandth year or so after the
appearance of the first men. You live in one of the corners of the northern hemisphere, amidst a
nation called Russia, and you live in this place and in this time by the will of God, the one by
whose will not only this planet Earth exists with its inhabitants, but also this obviously infinite
universe. You know this position of yours, and you ought to establish your relation to God in
conformity with this position, a relation that would be just as good for any man in your situation,
a relation that would be clear, comprehensible, and obligatory for every thinking person whether
they are Japanese, Malay, or Zulu.

And what relation to God are you, with your knowledge, trying to establish? You say, “God
revealed Himself and His truth five thousand years ago to one small Asiatic nation, and not
completely at that. Nineteen hundred years ago He revealed it in full in that He sent His son,
also God, to the same little nation. And the fact that the people then killed this son of God
caused the sin of the first men and of all those who came after to be redeemed. But besides this
redemption, God established the church through this son of His. This church guards the whole
truth and aids in the salvation of men by means of sacraments – by smearing one with oil and
giving one bread and wine to swallow – and this church exists only in Pudózh or in Russia. All
men who have lived before this church and who live outside of it are not taken into
consideration.”
Tell this – and many other things about baptism, images, masses for the dead, and, above all, a punishing and redeeming God – to some fresh, sensible man who has never heard of it, and he will stare at you, he will run away from you for fear that in your madness you will begin to strike him, or he will brand you as a dangerous lunatic.

We bear it all, as though it were not noticeable, only because this poison was inoculated in us in our childhood. And what is most terrible, this frightful, slowly inoculated poison has made Christ’s faith useless and inefficacious for us, even though Christ’s faith answers the highest demands of the men of our time. We have lived nineteen hundred years since Christ, but His teaching, in all its purity, even now completely answers all our demands for the establishment of our relation to God – not to the God of the Jews, the Orthodox, the Catholics, or the Protestants, but to that God by whose will this infinite universe exists, with the Earth in the midst of that universe, and with me upon that earth, hundreds of thousands of years after of the evolution of animal life in Pudózh, New York, or the deserts of Africa.

The chief difference between a private, exclusive relationship with God – which the churchmen, the Buddhists, the Brahmins, the Muslims, and others consider their religions – and the true Christian faith is this: all those religions, to say nothing of their incompatibility with knowledge and common sense, have the property of excluding and denying one another, whereas Christ’s religion is such that it is not only comprehensible and accessible to everyone, but it also cannot be rejected or disagreed with. This religion is not only not exclusive, but, on the contrary, coincides with everything true and exalted in all the other religions.

It says that the beginning of everything is spiritual, rational, and full of love. This beginning is called God and Father. It calls this beginning Father, because man recognizes this beginning in himself. Entering into life, it seems to man that he lives as an animal and that his animal being is his ego. But in proportion as his reason is developed, he sees that this animal is not free and that it suffers and perishes. In his consciousness he feels there is something that is not subject to oppression, nor to suffering, nor to perdition, and man enters into a contradiction with himself and into despair.

It is to this internal contradiction that Christ’s teaching gives an answer. It tells a man that it only seems to him that he lives as an animal. It only seems so to him, just as it seems that the bank is moving when he travels in a boat, or as it seems that the sun is moving during the day. What lives in man is only his spiritual, rational, and good beginning – the son of God. Man must transfer his ego from the animal to the spiritual, and satisfy the demands, not of the animal, but of the spiritual being. Man need but understand this, and the contradiction of his life disappears. Every oppression and suffering disappears, and he becomes completely free. Death is destroyed, because what is spiritual – what is God Himself – cannot be destroyed. It always was, is, and will be.

The essence of Christ’s teaching lies in this transference of our ego from the animal to the spiritual. The details of this teaching, begun with Christ and continued by all humanity, consist in the disclosure and destruction of those offences by means of which the men of the animal life, from the inertia of tradition, try to conceal from man his ruin in the animal life in order to maintain him on this false path. The disclosure of these offences is the work of the life of men – that which God wants of men.

Such, in its broadest features, is Christ’s teaching, that teaching by which the relation of man to the world is established. This teaching is general and not exceptional, the highest and most accessible to all, and not only does not contradict modern knowledge and the teachings of science, but even illumines and elucidates them.
And here, in the place of it, we will return to the comprehension of life – with sacrifices, redemptions, sacraments, and an evil, punishing and rewarding, personal God – such as it was five thousand years ago. For what? May God save us from that, dear friend.

What you are doing appears to me like a man who is travelling in a steam automobile. He does not know the road, or is simply tired of travelling fast. He wants to arrest the motion, so he sticks a rod between the wheels. The wheels catch it, but the machine still goes on, though more slowly. He lets down another rod, from the thinner end. There seems to be no trouble and the machine still works, but the wheels will soon catch the thicker end of the rod and then the machine will be clogged and spoiled. We cannot with impunity admit anything irrational or anything not justified by reason into our faith. Reason is given us from above, to guide us. But if we choke it, this will not pass with impunity. And the ruin of reason is the most terrible ruin.

Here I have told you a part of what I think, and I have told it to you lovingly. Please, do not answer me point by point, discussing any one of them in particular. If you disagree, explain to me how you combine your faith with your comprehension of life, and briefly and clearly express to me your world-conception.

Moscow, March 16, 1896


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